

Reflecting on teacher research on assessment: Challenges and innovations for the future



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Professor Marie Brennan is currently Professor of Education in the College of Education at Victoria University, Melbourne. She started her education career as a technical teacher of humanities in the 1970s, and

has worked in many positions since then, including as a member of the Access Skills Project Team in the Curriculum and Research Branch, co-coordinating the Victorian School Improvement Plan, and as a policy analyst in the ministry-wide Policy Coordination Division. Her university positions include stints at Deakin University, Central Queensland University, the University of Canberra and the University of South Australia. Now back in Melbourne, Professor Brennan is active in research that involves teachers, students and community members, including in Australian Research Council projects in Queensland and South Australia regional areas, as well as in Melbourne's west. She was the rapporteur at ACER's recent Excellence in Professional Practice Conference (EPPC), where teachers presented reports of their improvement projects relating to assessment.

Abstract

The theme of the 2015 Excellence in Professional Practice Conference (EPPC), held by ACER in May, was Improving assessments of student learning. A review of content and presentations for EPPC showed up some important trends and issues for further analysis and discussion.

In a significant number of schools, the focus on assessment was well integrated into an overall school improvement plan or approach. In other schools, the school process overwhelmed the focus on assessment, and at times even overshadowed the focus of the study to be shared. One group of presentations focused on using existing instruments in ways that advanced the teachers' understanding of the issue and students' knowledge and learning needs. Another group of studies demonstrated creative, practice-driven teacher research, largely by individual teachers, that had resulted in key advances in assessment practice.

Renowned education thinker Lawrence Stenhouse in 1975 defined research as 'systematic inquiry

made public'. This presentation will argue that the advances documented at EPPC meet this definition, by demonstrating knowledge production that is not merely for self-consumption.

The presentation will suggest key issues for supporting teacher research, and explore key issues still in need of research and innovation in the field. There is a critical place for teacher research among the range of assessment, pedagogy and curriculum integrations which can be developed through a range of research methodologies. Practices for classrooms may well be dreamt up outside those classrooms — yet unless and until those practices are co-produced by teachers and students, they remain in a black hole, unpractised. There is thus a central and creative role for teachers in developing assessment practice, whether or not the innovations are supported by research. Indeed, the best research useful for teachers and their students around assessment may well identify the in-practice problems which are yet to be creatively addressed.